

FAREWELL TO A HERO

BY HELEN GREGORY

MICHAEL Stanwell couldn't walk past any wrongdoing.

Delivering a eulogy at Mr Stanwell's June 4 funeral, his friend Ross Kerridge told the parable of the Good Samaritan, who helps a traveller who was beaten, left for dead and ignored by a passing Jewish priest and Levite.

"It was the Samaritan who helped the injured man, bound up his wounds and arranged for his care - at his own cost," Dr Kerridge said. "For me the parallels with the awful situation that Mike was in are profound. So many in our community have looked the other way and kept silent about their suspicions and their knowledge of dreadful things that were happening, but Mike confronted them - to his own great cost."

Mr Stanwell's brother, Professor Peter Stanwell, said the story "resonated" with mourners who gathered at St Paul's Catholic Church in Rutherford to pay their respects to the father of 10 and grandfather to 18, who as a dedicated teacher stood up to two paedophile priests.

He died in hospital aged 66 on May 28, af-

ter a period of poor mental health. "Michael was the sort of person who could not walk past a wrongdoing and not do something about it - and that's exactly what happened to him," Professor Stanwell said.

Mr Stanwell was a teacher at Tooleybuc Central School before becoming principal at St Joseph's Primary School, Merriwa, where he saw parish priest Denis McAlinden touch a girl while she was sitting on his knee.

He drove twice from Merriwa to Newcastle to report McAlinden to Bishop Leo Clarke and tried to ban the priest from entering school grounds. The church moved McAlinden to Adamstown, where he abused others.

Mr Stanwell later became principal at St Paul's at Rutherford, where he and priest David O'Hearn clashed over whether the school should expand to take non-Catholic enrolments and after teachers expressed concern about O'Hearn's forceful behaviour. He unsuccessfully appealed to Bishop Michael Malone for help.

"Michael was a deeply religious man and O'Hearn started to refuse to give Communion to Michael and his family and started to say things during the sermon about them," Professor Stanwell said. "He apparently

wrote to the Bishop and the advice he was given was that they should go to another church." Mr Stanwell was stood down after the two men clashed at a parish committee meeting and he confronted O'Hearn.

He punched O'Hearn seven months later in March 1999, after deciding to complain to the Vatican about the priest. Mr Stanwell pleaded guilty and was placed on a 12-month good behaviour bond. He resumed teaching after successful unfair dismissal proceedings, but did not regain his principal's position. O'Hearn was stood down in May 2008 after abuse allegations were reported to police and was jailed.

Professor Stanwell said his brother confided to their sister Ann that the pain of listening to students' experiences had affected his mental health.

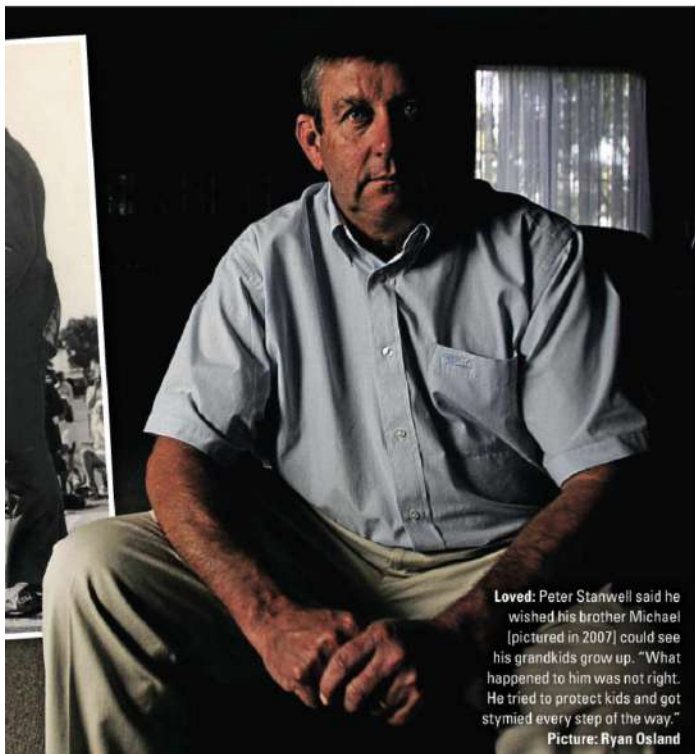
"I think I've paid a heavy price, but the children who were molested by these men have paid a much heavier one," he told the *Newcastle Herald* in 2016. Professor Stanwell said his brother paid with his life. "He lost his life because of the experiences he had with the Catholic Church."

He said reports in recent years about the scale of the abuse would have retriggered his brother's pain. "People are willing to



Honour: Prince Philip and Michael Stanwell. Ross Kerridge said the prince told organisers he enjoyed Mr Stanwell's speech and it "was the highlight of the day".

recognise that people involved in a stressful environment, in a war situation, or exposed to extreme trauma as police officers - there's this idea they've been exposed to mental



Loved: Peter Stanwell said he wished his brother Michael (pictured in 2007) could see his grandkids grow up. "What happened to him was not right. He tried to protect kids and got stymied every step of the way." Picture: Ryan Osland

stress," he said. "But if you were a school teacher and exposed to the activities of paedophile priests, that's pretty traumatic also. He was thinking 'These people's lives

are at risk unless I do something' and tried to do something, but every step he tried to take had a barrier put up in front of it. His experiences contributed to his mental state

and that change in mental state contributed to his alcohol use and essentially early loss of life. He died at 66. He should have lived longer than that."

Mr Stanwell was the eldest of eight children born to Fred and Pat Stanwell and grew up in Waratah. "He was always one of the first people to put their hand up [to help]," Professor Stanwell said. "He would walk from Waratah to Mayfield, do the grocery shopping and then walk back, as somewhere between the ages of 10 and 15. If Mum went out and did it, when she came back he would have baked biscuits for the other children."

Mr Stanwell attended Newcastle Boys High, where he and Dr Kerridge became mates and keen bushwalkers, even completing a five day trek through the Colo River wilderness without tents, sleeping mats or stoves. They achieved the gold level in the Duke of Edinburgh's Award program and received their awards from Prince Philip at a ceremony at Williamstown.

Dr Kerridge said Mr Stanwell was chosen to give the vote of thanks and expressed his gratitude to everyone, except the Duke. "But Mike then theatrically stopped, paused, and then stepped back to the microphone," he said.

"He then said 'I'm sorry... I forgot one thing. None of this would have happened, Prince Philip, without your inspiration and leadership in setting up the scheme of which I have been privileged to attain a gold award. So ultimately the main thanks for today is to you in establishing this program.' There was a sigh of relief across the crowd, then laughter and long applause. It was a brilliant trick to make sure that everybody else got their moment of glory before Prince Philip got his."

Professor Stanwell said his brother was the first in the family to attend university. He

studied teaching, following in the footsteps of their father, who had attended teachers' college, uncle, aunt and grandmother.

While at university he shovelled coal into blast furnaces at BHP at night. "Teaching was Michael's vocation - he was there to help kids," he said. "What maybe we thought we couldn't do, he modelled as to what we could do." Mr Stanwell soon married, started a family and enjoyed taking his children camping and fishing.

Professor Stanwell said his feelings about his brother's death fluctuated between anger and sadness.

"With some [of us] there's a mix of a life thrown away but a life that's taken away - it's a balance between some people feeling 'Why did he go down this pathway of addiction?' but also a feeling he was forced down this pathway. I've worked in that mental health context and I understand some of these choices can't be made. Mental health is not something you can either sign yourself up for, or out of. If you have a condition, there's not a magic bullet that turns that off."

Dr Kerridge said to fight for one's rights, family, community or country was "entirely commendable and can be heroic."

"But to fight against a wrong affecting others, when you could turn away and keep quiet is an altogether greater level of heroism. All of this came at great cost. The last ten years or more Mike has been in a difficult and awful place and it has been terrible to watch. It has been terrible for all the family and I grieve that the children lost so much of their father and the grandchildren never saw him at his best. Mike was a hero in every sense of the word. Never forget that. The world needs more Mike Stanwells."

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